

Nantucketers' Ancestral Burial Place

On the hilltop to the east of Maxcy's Pond, overlooking the water and with a sweeping sunset view is a very old cemetery that in recent years became inaccessible to visitors and that now, thanks to efforts on the part of the Cemetery Commission Workgroup, the Nantucket Land Bank, and the Anglers Club, has become accessible once again, albeit by a route up from the pond shore rather than, as in the past, by following West Chester Street Extension from Town all the way to its terminus.

Near the hilltop cemetery, Nantucket's North Shore Meeting house was built in the early 1700s. Tradition has it that it was built in 1711, the year that the First Congregational Society was formed, but some doubt has been cast on that early date. Whatever the case, in the well-practiced Nantucket house-moving tradition, the North Shore Meeting House was picked up in 1765, conveyed along West Chester Street past No-Bottom Pond, and relocated to another hilltop overlooking Nantucket Harbor. There it stood until it was moved one last time to make room for the 19th-century neo-Gothic North Church now gracing Centre Street. The peripatetic Meeting House, known today as the Old North Vestry, adjoins the west end of the North Church. The old building, so very plain of exterior, is well worth a visit for its beautiful interior and for concerts on its handsome and versatile modern organ.

The cemetery, bereft of meeting house, soon ceased to be used for burials. The last Nantucketers laid to rest there were Jonathan Coffin and his wife (name??), both in 1773.

Where once there had been Sabbath gatherings, things grew very quiet. The early English settlement, that had consisted of organically spaced homesteads with no town center, had relocated eastward from the "Pond Field" around Capaum Pond, Maxcy's Pond, Washing Pond, and the North Head of Hummock Pond, to narrow rectangular lots laid out next to the Great Harbor.

Still, the old burial place was not forgotten.

In 1838 a record of the Nantucket Proprietors was placed in the Nantucket Registry of Deeds referring to the “ancient burial ground of our forefathers” and mandating that it be “reserved as a sacred place,” never to be laid out by the Proprietors of the Common and Undivided Land “to any individual, company, or individuals” or “appropriated for any other purpose” and encouraging its enclosure with a fence.

The site remained unfenced, however. Little care was taken, and as the cemetery became overgrown, people complained about its neglect. The October 1, 1881 issue of the *Inquirer and Mirror* carried the following notice:

Forefather’s Burial Ground

John Gardner’s Gravestone. By the suggestion of Tristram Coffin, Esq., of Poughkeepsie, and through his efforts and those of several others, a subscription, amounting to about twenty-five dollars has been raised to procure a new headstone for the grave of John Gardner the first, in place of the one which has stood the ravages of time for one hundred and seventy-five years, and for many years a lone sentinel upon the old cemetery hill. The old stone will be removed to a place of safety whenever the new stone is ready to be set up. About twenty-five dollars more are required to make this praiseworthy effort a success. Persons desiring to contribute for this purpose may send subscriptions to this office and we will see that the amounts are faithfully applied. To protect this entire cemetery by a suitable fence would also be an object worthy of general contributions.

Also in 1881 a large stone marker was placed on the site honoring ten of Nantucket’s early male settlers.

Tristram Coffin (1609-1681)

Thomas Macy (1598-1682)

Edward Starbuck (1604-1690)

Peter Folger (1617-1690)

John Gardner (1624-1706)

John Swain Jr. (1664-1738)

John Coleman (1644-1715)

Richard Gardner (1626-1688)

Christopher Hussey (1598-1686)

William Bunker (1640-1712)

No mention is made of these men's wives, who accompanied them to the island, worked at their sides on their homesteads, and bore the children from whom all the subsequent "descended Nantucketers" would, in fact, descend. For the record, the wives of these ten men were:

Dionis Stephens Coffin (dates?)

Sarah Hopcott Macy (dates?)

Catherine Reynolds Starbuck (dates?)

Mary Morrell Folger (dates?)

Priscilla Grafton Gardner (dates?)

??Swain (dates?)

??Coleman (dates?)

Sarah Shattuck Gardner (dates?)

??Hussey (dates?)

Mary Macy Bunker (dates?)

In 1973 the Nantucket Board of Selectmen made the Nantucket Historical Association trustee for the cemetery, but the neglect continued. Then in 1992 an abutter closed off public access to the site, creating a great deal of unhappiness for local descendants of the English settlers and particularly for off-island descendants who often traveled long distances to photograph the memorial stones that had been placed in 1881.

Finally, in 2004 brush was cut from the spot, and in 2007 public access was reestablished courtesy of the Anglers Club and the Land Bank through the efforts of the Cemetery

Commission Workgroup. Plans are currently afoot to carry out a subsurface survey to determine how many burials there have been on the hilltop.

Over the years the site has been variously named or described as: the First Settlers Burial Ground; the Forefathers Burial Ground; Burying Ground, Proprietors of the Common and Undivided Land of the Island of Nantucket; this most ancient burial place of English ancestry; the Ancient Burial Ground near Maxcey's Pond; and even the supremely misleading "Dionis Grave Stones."

Now that public access has been assured, the time for an official name has come. Which among the multitude of possibilities will it be? And in the process, will the English settler women finally be recognized?